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1 October 1966

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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
1 October 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Situation in Nigeria

Summary

Africa's most populous country (population estimated at 48 million) is in the throes of a highly complex internal crisis rooted in its artificial origin as a British dependency containing over 250 diverse and often antagonistic tribal groups. The present crisis began to take shape shortly after Nigeria became independent in 1960, but for some years the apparent success of a federal parliamentary arrangement concealed serious internal strains. It has been in an acute stage since last January when a military coup d'etat destroyed the constitutional regime bequeathed by the British and upset the underlying tribal and regional power relationships. At stake now are the most fundamental questions which can be raised about a country, beginning with whether it will survive as a single viable entity.

At this time, even the immediate further evolution of the crisis is most uncertain. In general, however, the country has appeared in recent months, especially since a second army coup last July, to be moving at an accelerating rate along a downward slope with a consequent diminution of its prospects for unity and stability. Unless present army leaders and contending tribal elements soon reach agreement on a new basis for association and take some effective measures to halt a seriously deteriorating security situation, there will be increasing internal turmoil, possibly including civil war.

Background

1. The January 1966 coup, initiated by young southern army officers, dislodged from national power tradition-bound Muslim aristocrats of the important northern Hausa-Fulani tribal grouping. These feudal overlords had developed a virtual political monopoly within their native Northern Region--the largest and most populous of Nigeria's present four regions--and were tightening their grip over the federal power structure based in Lagos. The successor military regime established at that time by army commander Aguiyi-Ironsi and other surviving senior officers had, by contrast, a decidedly southern cast. Primary influence in the Ironsi regime was wielded by members of the aggressive and relatively well-educated Ibo tribe, which predominates in Nigeria's Eastern Region. Until very recently the most ardent advocates of national unity, the Ibos are also probably the most disliked and resented tribe in the country. They have long been hated in the backward north, where large numbers of them took up permanent residence over the years, attracted by the opportunities in commerce, government, and the public services.

2. By last May, most northerners had come to view Ironsi's regime as essentially a vehicle for Ibo domination of the government administration. The clincher for them was Ironsi's announcement late that month of decrees which promised to place northerners at a still greater disadvantage when competing for government jobs, while opening their region to wider southern encroachments. Anti-Ibo violence soon followed, initially in the form of a wave of attacks by mobs of civilian tribesmen in most northern urban centers on resident Ibos and their property. On 29 July northern military elements stationed in western Nigeria launched a bloody vendetta against all Ibo officers and other ranks. Ironsi was killed, and 31-year-old Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, the army chief of staff under Ironsi and the ranking northern officer, reluctantly assumed power.

The Gowon Regime

3. Even more than its predecessor, Gowon's regime has remained shaky and unsubstantial, incapable of providing effective national government. From the outset

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it has had only limited authority, and Gowon's own freedom of maneuver has been narrowly circumscribed by the northern military elements which thrust him into power. Recognizing the difficulties he faced, Gowon clearly indicated on taking over that he viewed his rule as a short-term holding operation while regional representatives negotiated to see if the country could be held together. Nonetheless, the Gowon variant represents, in broad terms, the return of northerners to the national leadership with their authority resting, for now at least, solely on the raw power of indisciplined northern soldiers.

4. It has become increasingly clear in recent weeks, however, that the northerners now in control are not representative of the old Hausa-Fulani Muslim aristocracy nor are they likely to restore that aristocracy to a dominant position either in Lagos or the north. Both at the officer and enlisted levels, the remnants of the army outside the Eastern Region--perhaps numbering some 7,000 men--are predominantly non-Hausa. Most line soldiers are from minor tribes--some Christian, some Muslim, many pagan--dwelling in the broad "middle belt" area which comprises the southern, non-Hausa part of the Northern Region. Gowon himself is from just such a background--he is a Christian from the Angas tribe. These soldiers evidently share the desire, long expressed by civilian middle belt elements, for one or more states of their own, separate from the oppressive former northern establishment. The dramatically increased influence of the non-Hausa northerner has already been reflected in the composition and behavior of the northern delegation to the constitutional talks now under way in Lagos. Its only Hausa member is the able leader of a former northern opposition party.

The Security Problem

5. Gowon's most pressing problem, though he may not recognize it, stems from the continuing indiscipline of the northern troops who put him in power. Gowon and the small junta of northern officers who comprise what now passes for the army's command echelon have so far been unable to halt these soldiers' continuing anti-Ibo depredations. With most surviving Ibo military personnel now back in their native Eastern Region, these depredations are mainly directed against the persons and property

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of remaining civilian Ibos. Such actions by the soldiers, abetted increasingly by aroused civilian mobs and even some police, have encouraged a general atmosphere of lawlessness which is being exploited by ordinary criminal elements.

6. The result has been a progressive deterioration of the general security situation in the north, and a parallel rise in tension in all parts of the country. Over the past few days this trend has markedly accelerated, so much so as to suggest that order is breaking down on a widening scale. So also are essential services--including railways and telecommunications--and commercial activities in the north, both heavily dependent on Ibo employees who are now fleeing the area in larger numbers than ever. The police, themselves increasingly targets of the soldiers' violence, clearly cannot be expected to salvage the situation. Last weekend the first retaliatory attacks against Hausas resident in the east occurred in Enugu, the regional capital, and in two other towns. In contrast with their counterparts in the north, however, the eastern authorities moved quickly and effectively to head off widespread communal violence. Evidently unable to control the unruly troops, Gowon apparently has directed his efforts mainly toward trying to prevent Ibos required for essential services from fleeing. At present the difficult security situation is further compounded by rumors forecasting dire developments on 1 October, Nigeria's national holiday. Most of these rumors revolve around new moves against Ibos in Lagos or against the east itself.

The Eastern Region

7. In reaction to the violent developments which have occurred since 29 July, the Ibo-ruled Eastern Region has moved close to what is in effect de facto separatism. The Ironsi-appointed military governor, Colonel Ojukwu, has steadfastly refused formally to recognize Gowon's takeover and continues to indicate publicly that "missing" General Ironsi remains his "Supreme Commander." Of the four regional military governors, only Ojukwu has never gone to Lagos, basically out of fear for his personal security. He knows that during the July putsch militant northern army elements in western Nigeria urged northern soldiers

then stationed in the east to kill him and he suspects
--with good reason--that they are still out to get him.

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Meanwhile, Ojukwu has on his own established an extensive array of regional governmental institutions. With the repatriation of the northern troops and the return of most surviving eastern military elements last month, Ojukwu has on hand an exclusively eastern force of some 2,000 enlisted personnel and 150 officers.

8. Since early August Ojukwu has consistently disavowed, both publicly and privately, any intention to secede from the rest of Nigeria. Although Ibo militants have probably pushed for secession, the governor and his close advisers are mindful that such a move would precipitate critical problems with the east's own minority tribes, some of whom, like their middle belt counterparts, have long been campaigning for a separate state. A key consideration is the fact that these minor tribes--not the Ibos--occupy most of the oil-rich coastal area, without which the Ibos could hardly hope to form an economically viable state. Ojukwu has warned, however, that he could be provoked into a secession attempt by any invasion of the Eastern Region by northern troops or by any effort to impose a separation of the non-Ibo provinces.

9. He has been similarly consistent since August in asserting that no real progress can be made toward resolving the constitutional crisis until a basic improvement in the security situation justifies some restoration of "confidence." He has argued that, beginning with the army, the country must be essentially regionalized on the basis, initially at least, of the present four states. He wants to retain only a loose federal association to conduct foreign policy and operate common services. Under pressure from the eastern minorities, he has even recently endorsed in principle the idea of additional eastern states. He seemingly still insists, however, that this is exclusively a matter for the region to decide without outside interference.

The Constitutional Conference

10. The spreading violence has already overshadowed the current negotiations in Lagos among regional

representatives and may eventually negate any agreement reached there. These talks seek a new basis for continued union. In opening the conference on 12 September, Gowon invited the delegates to seek agreement on any basis except the extreme solutions of a unitary system or a complete breakup. His elimination of the latter option contrasted with the doubts he had expressed on taking over the leadership about whether the country could or even should be held together.

11. Initially the conferees appeared headed toward fairly speedy agreement on the basis of a formula providing for a strengthening of the powers of the present four regions and only a very loose federal association. The substantially parallel positions in support of such a formula tabled at the outset by the key eastern and northern delegations seemed likely to be decisive. Gowon abruptly reversed the course of the conference, however, when at a meeting with the delegates from his native Northern Region on 17 September he presented--virtually as an ultimatum--a federal plan calling for 11 states and a strong central government. Under his plan the north would be divided into six states and the east into three, with the western and midwestern regions remaining intact.

12. In thus departing from his previous neutral stance, Gowon explained that the army had "changed its mind" and decided it could not tolerate any loose union. He and other army leaders had evidently concluded that army influence and interests would be adversely affected by such an arrangement. Gowon was almost certainly also influenced by pressures from his middle belt troops, which he could ignore only at the risk of his life, as well as from civilian spokesmen for the northern and eastern minorities.

13. Most of the northern delegates readily accepted Gowon's plan despite its wide variance from the consensus which had apparently emerged from the earlier northern consultations. Once formally presented as the new northern position, it soon gained the open support of all but the eastern delegates. The latter, which include minority tribal representatives attracted to the multistate plan, have remained calm, however, and have shown no hostility. Recent

reports indicate the conferees have actually made some modest progress toward agreement on some issues. At this stage, however, it remains questionable to what extent the east is willing to relent on its basic position, especially on Ojukwu's insistence that the creation of new states is a regional matter.

14. The northerners appear determined to split the east into two or more regions in order to reduce Ibo influence in any new federation. If this main objective cannot be achieved by agreement at the conference, Gowon will be under growing pressure to decree it, backing up the order with military movements into the east. In such an eventuality, civil war would almost surely follow. At present the main hope of averting such a debacle seems to rest on whether Ojukwu will be willing to make some early public gesture showing that the east is actively considering the creation of new states in its area.

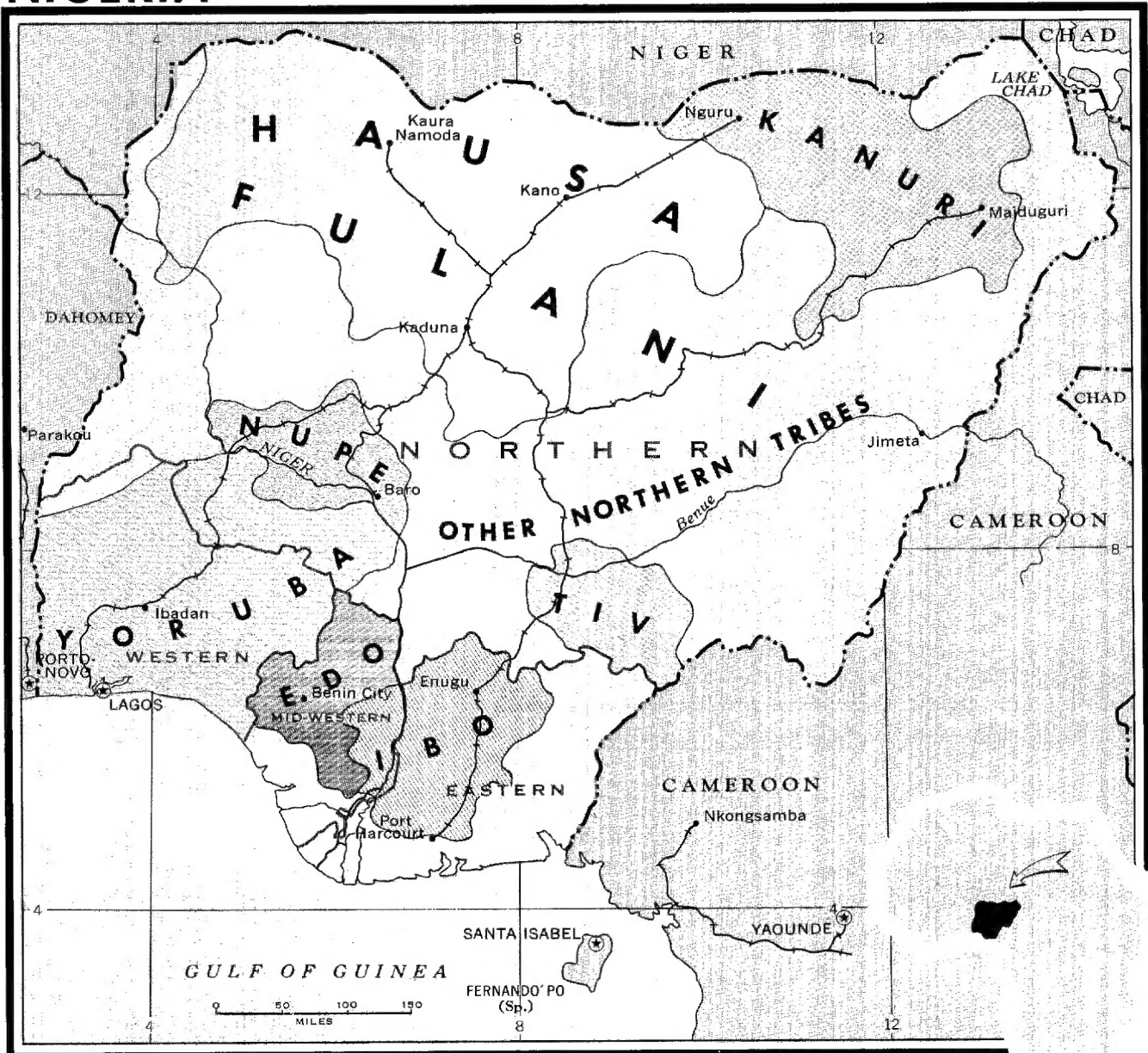
Outlook

15. Only if civil war is averted, if the contending tribal elements finally reach agreement on the thorny details of a new federal system, and if the now alarming security situation can be shored up, would it be possible for Nigeria to establish some kind of new equilibrium. The way would then presumably be open for a rapid return to civilian rule, a development strongly favored by Gowon, who is well aware that the badly shattered army cannot run the country effectively. Over the longer run, the admission of heretofore largely excluded forces and leaders to a significant role in the political dynamics of the country could conceivably give Nigeria a firmer foundation for healthy stability than it has ever had.

16. The initial assumptions are large ones, however, and the odds against realization of all three now appear great. If they are not realized, Nigeria seems doomed for now to a further descent toward Congo-like internal chaos. Indeed, given the continuing high pitch of tribal hatreds, the collapse of army discipline, the extent of political disintegration, and the probable further collapse of public services, a long period of internal confusion and conflict seems likely before some new order emerges. In the process a fragmentation of the country is a distinct possibility.

19. Nigeria appeared destined by its size, relative wealth, and energetic population to play a leading role in Africa. Although the tribal and regional strains on its national cohesion were recognized, Nigeria was considered to be a good bet to surmount these threats and to progress in unity and stability. The Western powers generally looked forward to its development into a strong Western-oriented bulwark against extremism in the area and an influence for moderation in African councils. Although Nigeria is clearly not now fulfilling these high expectations, it is possible that whatever state or states eventually emerge from the ashes will be based on more solid foundations. (Map)

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